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AUTHOR Rouzie, Albert
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ABSTRACT

The new "Computers and Writing" course implemented by the division of rhetoric and composition at the University of Texas at Austin is an elective second-year writing course that satisfies the university's requirement for writing component courses. In this course, instructors and students generate and apply rhetorical terminology and strategies appropriate to the electronic arena, and analyze how changes in technology are represented in the popular discourse and media. Course texts include artifacts and imagery, popular narratives--the movie "Terminator 2" won out over a host of others--public media discourse, advertising, fiction, academic analysis, and a hypertext textbook called "This Is Not a Textbook." The course emerged through a number of enabling conflicts, such as the chilly embrace humanities departments have given computers. The computer course plays a diverse set of roles. One is the introduction of technology criticism, design and practice, but another is the element of play that can be a part of writing. Although the course stresses critical thinking and rhetorical sophistication, much of the practice of learning to apply and adapt rhetoric to electronic discourse involves the exploration of the Internet, MUDs, hypertext, the World Wide Web, news groups, and other lively, highly conflictive and decidedly unacademic discourse arenas. A review of the collaborative process through which a group of instructors designed the course shows how conflict carried on through electronic media led to fruitful outcomes. (TB)

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Albert Rouzie
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University of Texas at Austin
Dept. of English

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The New Computers and Writing Course at the University of Texas at Austin: Context and Theory

It is my job to introduce to you the new Computers and Writing course implemented by the Division of Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas at Austin and to discuss the contexts for its development. Many factors contributed to its development. I will concentrate on the ones I feel are most important in helping you to grasp what the course is about, how it is structured, and why it came to be. I would like to add that this is my take on the course and may not reflect or completely account for the views of the course's other instructors and architects.

Some of the questions I will explore are: What are the circumstances in English Studies and Rhetoric and Composition that conspire to bring about the need for such a course? What are the pedagogical and theoretical justifications for offering a course whose basic assumption is that computer technology is in the process of effecting a sea change in how we think about literacy, that asks again "what is literacy?" in the computer age, and also "what is writing?" How did the collaborative process of course design generate the conflicts and questions that would inform course issues and concerns? Before discussing these questions, I would like to describe the course briefly.

The Computers and Writing course is an elective second year writing course that satisfies the university's requirement for writing component courses. The Rhetoric Division offers other courses in this category, designed primarily by advanced graduate students, that focus reading and writing

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activities around specific topics. In this course, students and instructors examine how electronic discourse differs from that of print media through writing projects involving word processing, synchronous conferencing, hypertext, and the Internet. Instructors and students generate and apply rhetorical terminology and strategies appropriate to the electronic arena, and analyze how changes in technology are represented in popular discourse and media. This analysis aims to historicize technology (the telephone, for example) as a means of fomenting critical thinking about the relationship between technology and rhetoric: rhetoric both in the more traditional sense as the means and media of persuasion and also as cultural rhetoric. Through analysis of cultural rhetoric, technology is seen as a conflicted site, a nexus of discourses (of utopia/dystopia, class affiliation, gender, and sexuality to name a few) composing the complex web of signification that constructs digital technology in the present cultural moment.

Discourse here is defined in the words of Greg Vanhoosier-Carey as "the matrix of language and meaning from which members of a community construct the reality of their world and through which they exchange ideas" (InterChange, 11/04/93). Electronic discourse, then, is "discourse made possible by and/or revolving around computers and other information technologies" (Slatin, InterChange, 11/04/93). Students are asked to become astute analyzers of the cultural rhetoric of technology as well as competent producers of rhetorically effective electronic documents. John Slatin wrote that "the course is designed to expand the conception of literacy, empowering students to move between the technologies of print and information and the rhetorical arts associated with each." In many ways, the course resembles other classes taught on line: A majority of class discussion takes place in Daedalus InterChange and students compose and post "articles" to our news

group, an electronic bulletin board shared by all sections of the course. Drafts and papers are sent to peers and the instructor via e-mail. A reading assignment may be in the course packet, in a course hypertext, or on the Internet. What's different about this course is our focus on the networked computer's effects on writing and communication, asking the broad question: What is the social, cultural and educational significance of the emergence and relatively sudden ubiquity of electronic discourse?

The course is divided into four units. The first is an introduction to the varieties of electronic discourse and an overview of key words and core concepts. The second unit focuses on the historical, social, and rhetorical contexts surrounding electronic discourse. Unit three stresses rhetorical analysis of on-line discourse, and the fourth unit has students applying the rhetoric they have learned toward the collaborative composition of an electronic document. Assignments begin with two conventional essays; the third and fourth assignments are electronic, culminating in a substantial final project utilizing hypertext, either stand-alone or the Internet-based hypertext of the World Wide Web, or MUDs and other conversational spaces on the Internet. Typically, the last four to five weeks of the course are devoted to workshop activity on the projects. The two electronic projects also include brief print components such as a design journal intended to have students reflect on their work and develop criteria for determining the success of their project.

Course texts include artifacts and imagery, popular narratives,—the movie Terminator 2 won out over a host of others—public media discourse, advertising, fiction, academic analysis, and a hypertext textbook called This is not a Textbook. TINTB is one of the most innovative aspects of the course. Although we were able to compile a course reading packet, we could not find

a suitable rhetoric or textbook that considered technology and rhetoric in terms of the information revolution. So each instructor composed a section of a large HyperCard document designed to offer analytical strategies and information on the course topics. The hypertextbook also reinforces for students the centrality of electronic discourse and models a variety of quite different hypertext composing styles. The five sections—information and hypertext, telephone history, rhetoric and writing on-line, representations of technology, and semiotics—are substantially linked, allowing the reader to progress in linear fashion or to move between sections in multiple sequences at the click of a mouse.

Now that you have an idea of the basic contours of the course, I would like to address its evolution in terms of the relationship of information technology to English and Composition Studies and some of the conflicts that have enabled the course to come into being.

I would like to suggest that the course evolved and is best seen as emerging through a number of enabling conflicts. First and most obvious is the chilly embrace Humanities departments have given computers and their resistance to dealing with electronic discourse and its implications for written communication. Traditional literature departments spurn electronic discourse's deconstruction of the author, whereas composition's embrace of computers and writing often follows the pragmatic promise of functional literacy computers seem to offer. A course that stresses critical approaches to technology cuts against the grain of institutional and corporate technological pragmatism. This is another enabling conflict because our students most likely enter the course with the practical goal of becoming computer literate in terms of job market expectations. Without aspiring to defeat those expectations entirely, the course focuses on what Sproull and Kiesler call the

"second order" or social effects of technology as opposed to efficiency effects. Business as usual is not so much directly challenged through second order effects as altered in unpredictable ways. This unpredictability describes much about the effects of our course on student literacy. We know that literacy is changing due to what the technology enables, but we are still searching for ways to gage and engage the differences. Through their work and play in the course, our students are active partners in the inquiry.

The Computers and Writing course plays a diverse set of roles. One is the introduction of information technology criticism, design, and practice into the pedagogical and curricular activities of college English instructors and their students. A related and I believe equally important role is the introduction of an element of play into writing that is generally missing from traditional approaches. Although the course stresses critical thinking and rhetorical sophistication, much of the practice of learning to apply and adapt rhetoric to electronic discourse entails playful exploration of the Internet, MUDs, hypertext, the WWW, news groups, and other lively, highly conflictual and decidedly unacademic discourse arenas. When students construct electronic documents, they must make rhetorical and aesthetic decisions about how to integrate pictures and text effectively, how to organize the information they present, and what conceptual links to make between documents, cards, and other writing spaces. Since they are put on the World Wide Web, many of their documents are exposed to a public audience, presenting them with the rhetorical necessity of sustaining the attention of an audience unknown in quantity and quality.

Work with computers is often a mode of serious play that can engage students in dimensions of thinking and imaginative play they seldom achieve in stock essay formats. If the composition of electronic documents

poses a challenge to the canonical forms of the linear essay, the computers and writing course makes this conflict one of the its primary questions. Students not only compose and read both, they also debate the opposing notions of literacy expounded by Neil Postman and Seymour Papert. As such, the course is designed to straddle, question and exploit the divide between the conventions of print and the evolving contours of information.

It is not difficult to see that the contours of electronic discourse are evolving, that its conventions and our thinking about them are in a state of flux and constant reformation. That we hesitate to draw firm conclusions about how computers will change literacy is understandably prudent. What we learn will be largely determined by the questions we ask. Each of us brings more or less articulated ideas about literacy with us. The fluid character of electronic discourse makes the hypostatic conventions of academic print all the more apparent. The relative anarchy of electronic discourse can lead to the desire to reign in and control the centrifugal forces of language on-line. When the committee that designed the course convened, we brought doubts, suspicions, enthusiasms, and celebrations about electronic discourse and computer classrooms. This was an inevitable and ultimately felicitous mixture.

The collaborative process of designing the course was long, sometimes difficult, almost always stimulating, and intensely collaborative. Out of about a dozen committee members, two were professors, the rest advanced graduate students. Experience with computers ranged from practically none to wide and deep. Some members were skeptical about the advantages of computer-based courses and let their concerns be known; some might be termed enthusiasts, while most fell somewhere in the middle. These contrasts helped rather than hindered articulation of the course goals. For example, in one

InterChange session, we discussed the famous rudeness and lack of social graces sometimes displayed in InterChange and other on-line venues. One member asked if it is a good thing when students suddenly feel liberated writing in InterChange instead of writing a traditional essay; another member suggested that as a good question for students in the course to consider. This lead to the point that responsibility or its lack could be related to the concept of ethos and the problem of establishing ethos in an electronic community. One member worried that teaching students writing as communication was a form of dishonesty about what would be expected of them on most academic writing situations. Another asked if the computer classroom was not just a new way to teach the same old things. Not surprisingly, all these somewhat contradictory fears, hopes and resistances came out most emphatically on-line in InterChange and echo many of the same questions raised by instructors and their students in the wider field. The conflicts negotiated by the committee turned out a sample of many of the issues our students would need to consider.

Our institutional guidelines called for a stress on rhetoric. The problem was that as electronic discourse was expanding notions of literacy to include competence with images and the new technological media of composing, it also seemed to call for some revision of traditional rhetorical terms. Supplementing face to face meetings with Daedalus InterChange sessions and voluminous e-mail, each member discussed difficult issues as they arose and offered a set of terms they thought appropriate for the course. Some were traditional rhetoric and composition terms—ethos, logos, pathos, the rhetorical triangle, claims, grounds, and so forth—others bore on technology and media—hypertext, the Internet, nodes, links, information, to name a few. One term—rhetorical arts—coined by Susan Romano, was used in in the

course unit titles because of its ability to bridge print and and computer rhetoric. In an committee interChange session, Romano explained that the term

> implies that there are many rhetorical arts that operate outside of computer-based communication and that rhetorical arts within computer-based communication are many. There is some crossover; some arts don't cross over very well at all. Some are complicated in interesting ways—audience is one of these. (InterChange, 11/04/93)

Romano went on to point out that the notion of audience is drastically altered "when your discourse community becomes hopelessly fragmented." The fragmentation of electronic discourse and its audience may have influenced us to construct a quite unified course design and common set of texts.

The large committee determined the basic units, decided to include a film, and consider the idea of composing a hypertextbook. After the initial designing was done, a smaller committee of the instructors wrangled over the film choice, course readings and assignments. An interesting fact, and one that surprised us, is that of all these tasks, including the selection of readings from among the many worthy that we read, the hardest, longest decision that generated the most e-mail, debate, and discourse was the choice of the film. During that period, I saw all or part of many candidates: Blade Runner, Terminator 2, Lawnmower Man, War Games, Sneakers, Total Recall, and some I can't recall. This may seem laughable, but the great movie debate indicates our sense of the importance of the film as the major popular culture representation treated in the course. Perhaps we were responding to the fragmentation Romano had pointed to. We were to have four sections of the

course, a substantially similar course packet, and a a course hypertext. We wanted that consistency to extend to the film so our students would engage each other in the course news group over issues brought up by these various texts and because we wanted to extend our own collaboration into the term. Perhaps we were attempting to construct a coherent audience for at least these texts, a base for a common language: the community or contact zone that allows, one hopes, for the authentic negotiation of difference. That this plan did not quite work as we expected may not suggest a level of hopeless fragmentation so much as reveal that we are still in the process of becoming literate in this new medium. Nevertheless, we found e-mail a force for coherent if drawn out dialogue and debate over film choice. Before we finally set the debate aside for other issues, we had determined that Terminator had too many moments of serious mysogyny, thanks to a scene by scene analysis of gender representations in the film by one astute and energetic member. Before we took a hiatus, we even received an eloquent e-mail disquisition from one member's husband on Prospero's Books. We chose Terminator 2.

Earlier I mentioned the collaboratively composed course hypertext This Is Not a Textbook. It's place in the course remains unsettled. The instructors have found it difficult to integrate TINTB readings into class discussions and assignments. This is partly due to the way people read hypertexts. They tend to read them tentatively and haphazardly. The multi-sequential nature of TINTB guarantees that no two readings are likely to coincide, and this makes it difficult to discuss as a group. But the hypertext plays an important role in the course nevertheless. If we are still figuring out how to compose in hypertext, it's for sure that we will continue to learn how to read it. In an area in which there are few sign posts and many ways to go, our hypertextbook provides one kind of map, and one, moreover, ideally suited to the

fragmented terrains of cyberspace and the multiply linked byways of electronic discourse. We see technologies converging to revise the rhetorical arts of reading and writing and in the process, revising the possibilities for conflict, play, connection and critique. Hypertext may be an overloaded metaphor for this new landscape, but it shifts and changes along with it. Perhaps, it can act as a model for knowledge and the complexly linked nature of discourse. Perhaps TINTB will become the seed for student revisions and additions to it as part of the work of the course. For as with reading and composing documents in print, composing in electronic media puts reading and writing in a whole new light.